

# School Refusal: 35 Tips for Parents

## **Have a Positive Attitude**

1. Believe that your child will get over the problem and let them know that you believe they can handle it.
2. As the parent, YOU must have the will, determination, persistence, and discipline to address the problem.
3. Be understanding and use reflective listening at times when you are not attempting to get compliance. Do not use shame, guilt, insults, sarcasm, or demeaning language. Acknowledge that you know you are asking them to do something hard, but something they can do.
4. The goal is not to eliminate anxiety, but to help the child learn to manage it effectively.
5. Take small steps. Push your child to get out of their comfort zone in other areas of life.
6. Expect setbacks and relapses, but continue to express clear expectations and encouragement.
7. Do not avoid things or situations that make the child anxious. Avoidance will make things better in the short run, but reinforces anxiety in the long run.

## **Improve Communication Skills**

8. If you suspect underlying psychological conditions for the child's school refusal, ask for referrals to therapists, counselors, or psychologists for an assessment.
9. Talk to the school about a gradual start back to school with the ultimate goal of full attendance. As quickly as possible, return to attending some part of the day.
10. Do not ask leading questions. Questions like, "Are you anxious?" and "Are you worried?" will result in an avoidance response. Ask, "How do you feel?"
11. Learn to issue parental commands. Directives must be made with eye contact, simple, clear, specific expectations, rewards and consequences, and not in the form of a question.
12. Respect the child's feelings, but do not empower them. The message should be: "I know you are scared. That is OK. I will help you get through this."
13. Maintain good contact and communication with the school, counselor, and teachers.

## **Consistency of Consequences/Rewards**

14. Have every school day begin the same way. Develop a "Morning Routine" that is the same every day, and do not allow the child to vary from routine. A therapist or child specialist can help you develop one.
15. Do not allow excessive questions or conversation from the child to change the morning routine or delay going to school.
16. Be reliable and on time when picking up your child.
17. If you cannot get your child to school, make your house boring. The child should not be allowed to do anything during school hours that he/she would not be allowed to do at school. Remove all competing activities to school attendance.
18. Reward the child for going to school with Mom or Dad's undivided attention, in a positive activity, for half an hour that evening.

## **Getting Them Out the Door**

19. Stay calm. If the child sees your anxiety, frustration, anger, or disappointment, you can make their anxiety worse.
20. Start the night before by doing the following:
  1. Go over the morning routine with the child.
  2. Decide and lay out clothing (no changes).
  3. Set aside all equipment (shoes, books, etc.).
  4. Get the child to bed early enough that they will awake rested.
21. The morning of school:
  1. Wake the child up 2 hours before the deadline for bus or school.
  2. Monitor and insist that they following the morning routine. If they can complete the routine ahead of schedule, the time is theirs to spend as they wish.
  3. Make sure they are dancing "to your tune" and that you are not "dancing to their tune."
  4. Avoid "power struggles." Expect and insist on compliance. Very simply, it is compliance or consequences.
22. Say "When" rather than "If" when talking about their school refusal (When you are at school today...).
23. Issue a parental directive rather than talk, explain, preach, or beg when attending school is immediate.
24. Listen to your child and encourage them to talk about their fears at appropriate times, not when attempting to get them to attend school. "We can talk about that this evening."
25. Praise and reinforce achieving the "Morning Routine."
26. Use direct statements when it is time to go to school. Do not ask questions that give them the option of not going to school. Do not ask, "Do you think you can go to school today?"
27. Learn to ignore statements or behaviors that indicate the child is contemplating or has decided not to attend school.
28. Give the child as much control as possible (the illusion of control) but do not give the child the decision making power about whether or not they are going to school. "Do you want to buy your lunch or take your lunch to school today?"
29. Experiment with upbeat, soothing, or dance music as a way of getting through the "Morning Routine."
30. If you become emotional when trying to require that your child attend school, have the other parent, a relative, a neighbor, school personnel, coach, or therapist take the child to school. "Tag Team" them as soon as you feel that your child is pressing your buttons.

## **Once They Are at School**

31. Make sure that the child knows you will return at the end of the school day, and they are to stay at school no matter what, unless injured.
32. Leave quickly (do not look back or hover). Do not reinforce their distress by rescuing them from anxiety.
33. Let the child have something of yours to keep in her pocket, as a transitional object.
34. No matter how bad it gets, let them experience the success of finishing the day. Reinforce, reward, and repeat.
35. Celebrate their success with time with one or both parents in an enjoyable activity, favorite dinner, extra electronic time, etc.